

Are we Building Without Walls?

Ephesians 2

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Last week we began our journey through Ephesians. We heard how this letter serves as a blueprint for how God is building up the church in and through Jesus Christ. Chapter one uses language of praise and thanksgiving to describe how our relationship to God starts with God's love for us. The language used is broad and flowery. There are three important themes that spell out how God relates to us.

- 1) God chose you even before the world began.
- 2) God used Jesus to set you free.
- 3) God's plan is to bring everything together under Christ.

The action all belongs to God. These themes will keep coming up to remind us that the church is God's building project and that God makes it possible for us to be part of it.

Chapter 2 is the theological foundation for God's relationship to humanity. We're going to cover a lot of turf today, so hold on. In this chapter, the themes of God's mysterious plan in Jesus start to focus in on a particular people, the Gentiles. This encompasses any one who is not Jewish by birth. Take out your bulletins and let's look at this together.

Ephesians 2:1-3 -We are dead without God.

Paul starts out this chapter talking about the consequences of sin. Verses 1 and 3 say, "Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins...all of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By that nature we were subject to God's anger, just like everybody else."

Many ancient cultures had well developed philosophies of the nature of sin and its implications on the relationship to God or gods. Often it went something like this: a person does something wrong (they sin) which causes something else bad to happen. A farmer gets caught stealing grain from his neighbor. Shortly after this a drought occurs. This causes many people in the community to go hungry or even die. Many in the community believe that the drought occurred because of the farmer who stole the grain. These ancient philosophies would say that the sin of the farmer caused the gods to get angry and punish the community. We can see echoes of this at the end of verse 3. Paul makes it clear that there is a particular way to follow God. Following one's selfish desires leads to death, even in life. When the original hearers of this letter first heard this, they may have expected to hear how God's anger would be unleashed. But instead Paul turns everything up side down.

Ephesians 2:4-10 Grace and New Life

Verse 4 reads, "But! God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead." The "but" at the beginning of this verse changes everything.

It's like Paul is saying to the Gentiles, God is not who you think God is. God is not the one to get angry and rain down wrath on you when you screw up. God does not participate in punishing you anymore than you punish yourself by not living the way God would have you live. God will not cause you more harm when you are already down. Paul shows us how God breaks down walls of guilt, shame and our own anger toward God by revealing God's mercy and love to us.

This is incredible. But it takes some time to sink in, doesn't it. This reality requires a conversion... I know, we're Lutherans and we don't think about faith in terms of conversion. But trusting that God is merciful and full of grace, even when we are living like we're dead requires us to give up any other image of God. We need to be converted to God's mercy and love in order to live the new life that God has given us.

In verse 8, Paul spells out God's biggest surprise: "God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you cannot take credit for this; it's a gift from God." Many of you may remember learning this in confirmation class as youth, which may not have given you the best appreciation for how awesome and freeing this is. The "you" in this sentence is plural in Greek. It implies that this is more than just individual salvation, but it is an act that is universal – it is done for the sake of all people. It doesn't matter what color you are, what language you speak, what party you vote for, the family members you have, what kind of housing you have or don't have or how smart or able bodied you are. When you trust that this act of God is for you, you are joined by Christ to God's salvation.

It's pure gift – and verse 9 is just as important. "Salvation is *not* a reward for the good things we have done." Ask just about anyone you know to tell you how a person gets to heaven and I would venture to say the overwhelming response would be, "Be a good person, be kind to people, do good and God will let you into heaven." There's even a term for this kind of belief, it's called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism – it's not Christian faith. This isn't the way God works. God works a lot harder than we do when it comes to saving us. Every active verb in this chapter has God or Jesus as the actor. God saves us from a dead life and raises us from death with Christ. God gives new life. God unites us with Christ. God seats us with Christ in the heavenly realms. All of this is done before anything else so that, as verse 10 tells us, "we can do the good things that God had already planned for us long ago."

Paul makes the case that the church is the community where God's salvation is at work through grace. The second half of the chapter gives some shape to what God's salvation looks like as it becomes active in the church.

Ephesians 2:11-22 - A New Community of Peace

As I mentioned before, Paul is writing to a community of Gentile believers. In the early days of the church there was great controversy over whether Gentiles could be Christians without ascribing to Jewish customs first, namely circumcision. You can read more about this conflict in Paul's letter to the Galatians. It's obvious that divisions and exclusion were prominent between Jews and Gentiles of this day, even when they believed in the same God.

Like the first verses of chapter two, verses 11 and 12 reflect the separation and hopelessness that the Gentiles lived with before the message of Christ reached them.

And like the "but" in verse 4, the "but" in verse 13 changes everything for the Gentiles. "But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ."

Again, Jesus is the actor and the Gentiles are the passive recipients. Jews and Gentiles are also brought near to each other in a new community formed by Christ. Verse 14 says "For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the walls of hostility that separate us."

There's about a month of Sunday's worth of sermons in this one verse. In short, you could say that Jesus moves people from violence to peace; from being incomplete to being whole, from hostility to hospitality. The most scandalous thing about this is that Jesus does this by changing the rules. When rules harm relationships and divide communities, Jesus breaks the rules by being nailed to the cross. Christ's death on the cross makes peace - between people and God. No longer are communities walled off to make people different, isolated, or even more special than others. Jesus creates a wall-less community whose common identity is found in his grace-filled, unfailing love.

Jesus breaks down walls between different types of people to make the church bigger and more inclusive than we could ever imagine. This year we've been intentional about creating a place for all to belong. It has given us an opportunity to participate in Jesus' work of breaking down walls.

Recently, I talked to Martha Bec, one of the leaders of the South Sudanese Dinka church that worships here on Sunday afternoons. She told me that many of the female elders of the Dinka community are isolated much of the week and that they get depressed. She wondered if there were any groups at Zumbro that do crafts and if the group might be willing to teach the elders. I talked to a group of women who make quilts for kids a couple times a month and they said that if they can learn to tie a knot, they would be welcome. We're not quite sure how this will work, but it seems like everyone is willing to focus on what we share in Christ and work the differences of language and culture out as it goes along. Who knows? It might just be a way that Christ's peace takes on life in our community.

Isn't this true for all sorts of things in God's church? We discover something new that builds faith, deeper relationships, and excitement for God – only to realize along the way that what we have found is God already at work building people up into his church. This changes how we see what the church is and what it does.

Paul lays out a pretty remarkable blueprint of God's church in Ephesians 2. God tears down the wall of death and gives new life by grace. God unites people with Christ and tears down walls that divide people from each other. God builds people into the body of Christ and establishes a new holy temple – not made of brick and mortar, but made up of people in whom God lives by his Spirit. God has made room for you and is working through you to make room for others to be a part of God's church without walls. Amen.